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More light on Flight 007's dark secrets

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New evidence further erodes Washington's account of the destruction of a South Korean airliner over Soviet territory last year.

The civilian plane was on a sophisticated spy mission, just as the USSR has maintained, according to an authoritative article in the British magazine *Defense Attache*, which is highly esteemed by that country's military establishment.

If the new assessment is accurate, the Reagan administration must assume ultimate responsibility for the deaths of 269 people aboard Korean Air Lines (KAL) flight 007 when it was shot down.

The Boeing 747 jumbo jet was downed in the early morning hours of Sept. 1 after straying some two-and-a-half hours in restricted Soviet airspace over one of the USSR's most sensitive military regions—Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island, north of Japan. The area is the site of highly secret naval, air and missile installations and testing grounds.

SOVIET CHARGES

Moscow has held from the beginning that the plane was engaged in an espionage mission, causing it to detour 300 miles north of its Anchorage-to-Seoul flight plan, and that the Soviet air defense command was under the impression that its target was a military plane, not an airliner, engaging in evasive maneuvers to avoid interception.

The Reagan administration immediately used the episode to launch a propaganda barrage against the USSR, escalating the cold war and demanding more military spending from Congress. Terming the USSR a "ruthless totalitarian state" guilty of "wanton, calculated, deliberate murder," Washington seized upon the incident to justify the introduction of new U.S. missiles in Europe and to urge nonaligned nations to engage in "a fundamental and long overdue reappraisal" of the Soviet Union.

The U.S. version of the episode was that human or mechanical error was responsible for the deviant flight path; that the crew was unaware of the diversion; and that Soviet pilots shot down the plane without warning and in full knowledge that it was a civilian airliner. This interpretation was sharply criticized in the socialist world and by much of the left press around the world (*Guardian*, Sept. 28), but until publication of the *Defense Attache* article this month the response from the pro-Western media was almost entirely supportive of Washington.

Defense Attache, a privately published bimonthly, argued that the KAL plane intentionally flew over the USSR on a spy mission, though the plane itself was not engaged in collecting data. The mission was timed to coincide

with three overpasses by the U.S. spy satellite *Ferret-D* and the recently launched space shuttle *Challenger*, which is said to have coordinated the information gathering. The mission also was monitored by various U.S. ground listening posts in the region and by RC-135 spy planes.

Purpose of the illegal overflight was to trigger Soviet air and ground defenses into action so that the U.S. could gather invaluable information about Moscow's military command, control and communications structures.

Responding to the article, *Defense Secretary* Caspar Weinberger said last week that "had we wanted to test Soviet radar there are a lot better ways to do it than with a 747 jumbo jet full of civilians." Aside from the fact that responsible sources have said that the U.S. employed airliners for surveillance work in the past, *Defense Attache* offered a plausible explanation of why the 747 was used.

"If U.S. intelligence services planned the Korean incident, they would have no doubt that they could not achieve their aims with a military aircraft," the article said, speculating that such a plane would be shot down and cause a negative incident. "Equally, they would not achieve their aims with a manifestly civilian aircraft because the Russians would never have turned on all manner of military radars and electronics. They would need to offer an aircraft of initially apparently military character, which would turn out later to be apparently civilian."

This sounds complicated but is really rather simple—if the KAL plane's rendezvous with an RC-135 just before entering Soviet airspace is kept in mind. The two planes flew side by side for 10 minutes and then the spy aircraft veered off sharply, returning to its base in Alaska. Since the radar signature of both planes is identical on Soviet equipment, it would appear that an intentional effort was made to convey the impression that a military, not civilian, plane was intruding—which is what the Soviets actually thought. "It was a dummy-selling tactic," the magazine said, "creating the possibility [to the Soviet ground installations] that a military aircraft was flying in to cross the borders of the Soviet Union. Subsequent identification as a civilian aircraft would offer protection against the otherwise imminent attack."

In other words, the USSR eventually was supposed to discover that it was only a straying airliner and let it go on its way while the U.S. satellite, shuttle and listening posts collected their information.

The U.S. also denied that *Challenger* was involved, maintaining the shuttle was too distant to monitor the episode. The article maintains, however, that while *Challenger* was not perfectly positioned because of an unexpected delay in launching, its orbit of 1400 to 2000

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miles south was "amply close to involve the shuttle in its command, control and communications role in conducting the extended intelligence operation."

The author of the Defense Attache article was not named by the magazine "for professional reasons," but was vouched for by the editor, Rupert Pengelley, who is well regarded in defense circles. Lending additional credibility to the article, the author revealed hitherto secret information about a similar incident two decades ago when two U.S. planes were shot down in two months over the German Democratic Republic. The article says these incidents were connected with the launch of a U.S. electronic data-collecting satellite shortly before and that—as in the recent episode—the planes were supposed to stimulate Soviet defense communications.

U.S. STORY INCONSISTENT

Although the U.S. transformed the 007 event into a propaganda coup, Washington's version was always highly questionable with or without the analysis appearing in the British publication. At first the U.S. said the USSR was aware from the beginning that flight 007 was a civilian plane, but later backed down. Washington maintained that the Soviet pilots never fired warning shots or tried other means of communicating with the errant airliner—which turned out to be totally false, even according to tapes in the Reagan administration's possession. Then, the White House withheld the information about the rendezvous between the 747 and the RC-135—information that became public only after a congressman inadvertently let it out after a secret briefing. The U.S. also said it was unaware of any important military exercises that day at Kamchatka, only to acknowledge later that it was indeed known to the Pentagon that a Soviet missile test was planned.

The U.S. explanation about pilot or mechanical error has been disputed by a great many experts who pointed out that KAL 007 was guided by three separate and highly sophisticated navigational systems as well as by ground checkpoints in several locations along the planned route and by ground controllers in Japan.

In place of Washington's simple interpretation of the episode, the Defense Attache version helps construct the following scenario:

By prearrangement—either with KAL, or

with the crew—007 was supposed to depart from the flight path which the pilot, a veteran of many years in the South Korean air force, had flown almost daily for years. After leaving Anchorage, the Korean plane met with the RC-135 and flew side by side to confuse Soviet radar. At a certain point, 007 penetrated into Soviet airspace over Kamchatka Peninsula. The plane was tracked immediately and Soviet jets were sent up to intercept, but did not make contact in the darkness. The airliner then headed over the sea until reaching Sakhalin Island, when more Soviet planes took to the air. The Soviets tried every means possible to signal the plane. The airliner did not respond to radio signals, although its radio was not reported damaged. The Soviet pilots wagged their wings and then fired tracer cannon bursts ahead of the KAL plane to attract attention. Then, just a minute before the intruder was to leave Soviet airspace completely, the defending jets fired.

From Washington's point of view, the mission was a no-lose proposition: if it went according to plan, the intelligence data would be gathered without retaliation; if something went awry—in this case, the Soviet confusion over the plane's identity—the U.S. would reap a propaganda bonanza in its depiction of an "evil empire." The only losers were those advocating a lessening of world tensions—and, of course, the 269 people aboard flight 007. ■